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ABSTRACT

With the encouragement of an English instructor for whom English was a second language and who was consequently enthusiastic about writing experiences, English students in a Texas high school put together an anthology of literary criticism on the modern American novel. Honor students read American novels of their choice and wrote evaluations of them for young readers. Criteria for literary criticism collected by students through reading and discussion were condensed by the teacher into a workable guide for the students to use while reading. After several successful writing experiences, the class focused on the anthology. The instructor guided the students through each stage of the writing process for their critical essays. Individual conferences and peer review sessions were held. As the writing became more refined, the reviews were divided into three categories: established classics; books that deal with teenage anxieties such as love, war, prejudice, or friendship; and books of science fiction or fantasy. The final product was rewarding for the students, parents, and instructor, and included all the essays, regardless of quality. Other writing experiences used by the teacher include imitating famous writers' styles, writing chapters about an established character, writing "Cliffs notes" for a novel, writing a reader's theatre script about a poet, and creative writing on unit and semester exams. In addition to improving grammar, punctuation, and spelling, such writing experiences have also served the emotional needs of the students. (HTH)

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THE WRITING EXPERIENCE:

A NEW DIMENSION

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INTRODUCTION

Long ago I experienced the excitement of new discoveries when, at the age of 13 I started to learn the English language. I embraced an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, thus becoming immersed in the role of perennial student. Ultimately, I became an English teacher, anxious to share with others the literature and beauty of my newly acquired language. The desire to continue to learn in order to become a better teacher led me to an unforgettable discovery - the magic of the writing experience.

At a summer writing institute, I was encouraged to accept the challenge to write. This challenge fit my tendency to take risks. The writing I had done up to then had been motivated by promises made to individuals. I wrote my first play during the bicenntenial year, when the Jewish community was searching for someone to present Jewish contributions to America. Many of the poems I composed were meant to show loved ones the appreciation I felt for them, and even the one short story I completed was guided by the

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love for my students and a promise I made them at the end of a school year. I took such pleasure and pride in my work, that I vowed to share this joy with my students.

Last year presented a perfect scenario. Most of my sophomore and senior English students had been in my classes before, believed in my teaching methods, and were willing to try new things with me. Thus, armed with ammuniton gathered at the National Writing Project Institute, and convinced that anyone could write and master the language if willing, I embarked on a most excitng and fruitful experience - a new dimension of the writing process in the English classroom.

ANTHOLOGY

The idea of putting together an anthology of literary criticism on the modern American novel came to me early in September. Our English department had started a summer reading program in which the sophomores were asked to read three works by classical American writers. This assignment had been received negatively by most students, who complained they should not have been forced to read specific books, but should have been free to make their own choice. At this point, I became curious as to what their choices would have been, so after two weeks of school, I announced that each student in my honors class would read an American novel of his/her choice and evaluate it in writing for its merits to young readers. Immediately, students asked if I would give them a list from which to choose! I reminded them of their protestations against having been told what to read.

After a couple of weeks, most students had chosen a

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novel approved by me for suitability. The only criteria I specified were that it could not be a detective story or a popular romance. The book had to have a meaningful message for the reader, and it had to be by an American writer. I sent a letter to the parents explaining the project at hand and asking for their cooperation. This made the students appreciate the importance of what we were about to do.

Most students did not really understand what the words "criteria" or "literary criticism" meant. The year before, we had studied A TALE OF TWO CITIES by Dickens, and I had taught them how to evaluate a book by pointing out the literary techniques used by the writer and having them relate Dickens' world to their present environment. I divided the class into three groups. One group went to the library and read three literary critiques on any American author. They then paraphrased the critiques and listed five criteria which had been used by the critics in evaluating the works.

The second group brainstormed possible ways to evaluate a book, following some guidelines given by me. The third group sat with me in a circle to discuss Steinbeck's TRAVELS WITH CHARLIE, one of the summer reading books. I led the discussion and showed them what I looked for in a book. I brought up different techniques, ideas and outstanding features of the book and asked that they discuss them with me. The students were rotated through each of the three groups. I then categorized and condensed all the collected criteria into a workable guide to be followed by the students as they read their novels.

In the meantime, we began to experiment with different

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types of writing based on the summer reading books and the literature we were reading. Students wrote a paper agreeing or disagreeing with Steinbeck's description of Texas. Steinbeck had used his imagination to describe the previous occupant of the motel room where he stopped by using his power of observation and careful attention to detail. I had the students emulate Steinbeck's style by describing a person or persons previously present in a room, using only clues left behind in the appearance of the room. Because writing is a long and involved process, the students resisted it adamantly. However, the more they wrote, the better they became.

After several successful writing experiences, we focused once more on the anthology. Having done all the preliminary library work, discussing, and brainstorming, the students were ready to begin reading the novel. Just at this time I found out I needed surgery and would have to leave for a nine-week period. The anthology was postponed until I returned, but I invited the students to read the novel while I was gone.

PREWRITING, WRITING, EDITING

When I returned, we started taking the final steps in completing the anthology. One day I asked the students to write down anything that had impressed them about their novel. This was the first prewritng. An informal atmosphere prevailed - students could choose not to write, to go for a drink of water, or walk around. Only one rule was given; no one who was working was to be disturbed.

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After all the students completed their first draft, we discussed them in class, and, using Peter Elbow's looping technique, I pointed out one or several sentences that seemed to indicate a lead for the students to follow in beginning their writing. Then the serious work really started. Students became both frustrated and excited as they continued to write. I scheduled individual conferences, encouraged them to read each others' work and help clarify each others' questions.

As the writing became more and more refined, we began to think of publishing the anthology. Three students were chosen to write the preface, two students took charge of the art work, and three students came up with a format for the book. Through our class discussions we found out that we could divide the students' choices of books into three categories: established classsics; books that deal with teenage anxieties such as love, war, prejudice or friendship; and books of science fiction or fantasy.

Further discussions brought us to the conclusion that regardless of time or place, good writers have always focused on universal themes, and what has made them great is the unique style in which they have presented them. Thus, we divided our book into themes and styles, but seeking originality and fresh outlooks, we consulted the thesarus and called our divisions "Modes" and "Visions." The whole class then sought a title for our anthology. I had always joked with them that our class was one of organized chaos. All agreed the word chaos should be included, and finally we called it FROM STORMS OF CHAOS. The final product was a most

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rewarding sight for the students, parents, and above all, me. Not all the literary critiques were outstanding, but all the students tried and had a paper included. They had taken the first step in learning to evaluate literary works, using research as a tool to guide their thinking.

Even though the anthology has been my most ambitious undertaking, it was just one of many projects I pursued with this particular class and other classes before them. I always search for writing ideas that will challenge students and provide them with a creative outlet and a sense of pride.

OTHER WRITING VENTURES

One of the methods I use to make students better writers is for them to imitate famous writers' styles. I asked one class to read the description of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Even though Poe never goes into the house itself, he creates a chilling feeling towards it with his power of description. I examined his style and came up with a formula students could follow. First they had to choose a place to describe, then they had to be in a certain mood as they approached it. As they contemplated this place, their initial mood would reach a crescendo of ecstasy, almost a wild frenzy in which they would lose sight of reality, and then slowly come back to earth and try to ratonalize the mood experienced. The students rose to the occassion and wrote some beautiful descriptive passages.

Another assignment dealt with the Arthurian and Charlemagne cycles. After we read two excerpts from the legends, I asked the students to write a short chapter,

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sequel or fantasy using one of the established characters. The setting could be the Middle Ages, the present or the future. They were to keep in mind the characteristics of a good short story.

Among other things I tried with ninth graders were special creative projects based on a novel read by all in class and at home. One class studied RED SKY IN THE MORNING and wrote its own CLIFF'S NOTES.

ENGLISH WEEK AND READER'S THEATER

The second year I taught at Incarnate Word High School, our English Department initiated a yearly celebration called English Week. During this week we highlighted the many aspects of English in our daily lives by inviting speakers who use the knowledge acquired in English classes in their jobs, by holding writing contests, by writing and performing skits that dealt with grammar, vocabulary or literature, and by giving an award to the best writer during an assembly in which a classic play was presented to the students.

My sophomore class was studying modern American poets at the time, so I challenged the students to choose an interesting poet and write a reader's theater script about him. We chose e.e. cummings. On a Saturday afternoon, several students went with me to the University library where we spent three hours buried in the shelves looking for material about cummings. After sorting out the information, and with my guidance as to what format a reader's theater requires, the students started the composing process. Having a flair for the dramatic, I wrote the beginning and the

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ending, and along with the class, directed the presentation.

The writing experience has also been very successful in other areas of English instruction as well. My students always expect something out of the ordinary in my six weeks or semester exams. A piece of creative writing is always included. Students know ahead of time what it will be, and can do the prewriting and writing at home, bring it to class, and do the final draft in the classroom. This past year, after having studied the transcendental movement in American Literature, as part of their exam students had to write a response to the philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau in poetry form. The following is one of many excellent responses.

NATURE IN EMERSON

Impersonal and powerful,
it rules the soul.
Beautiful but deadly,
it tempts the soul.
Confusing and unexcusing,
it limits the soul.
Found where least expected,
an illusion of perfection.
Nature is more than superficial,
it is the essence of life.

GRAMMAR, SPELLING, VOCABULARY

In the teaching of grammar and punctuation, the writing process has been equally effective. This year, in trying to clarify the use of difficult verbs such as LIE and LAY, I

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used a combination grammar game and writing exercise. I wrote the different tenses of difficult verbs on index cards. Then I divided the class into groups and handed each student a card with a different tense from that of the other members of the group. The group was to make up a story using the verb with the correct tense which each student had been given. After the stories were finished, one student from each group shared that group's endeavor with the rest of the class. Students had a great time making up and sharing their stories, and at the same time learned the correct usage of verb tenses.

One particular student could not spell at all. He tried and tried and still could not succeed. Since he had never been encouraged to write, he did not know how to go about expresring his own thoughts. I decided to do something rather unorthodox for English teachers. I took his next two papers and corrected them for him. Then I asked him to recopy them for a better grade. I also encouraged him to read as much as he could. Soon he began to see that his ideas were very good and that he could write. He understood how his spelling problem got in the way of his writing. The more he read and the more he wrote, the more he gained confidence in his ability to express his ideas. The process of writing and rewriting allowed him to take risks and dare to write, knowing that the rough drafts took him one step closer to overcoming his handicap. At the end of the year, his papers had grown from four sentences to a page and a half and contained very few spelling errors.

In teaching vocabulary, I borrowed an idea from another

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teacher, and had the students write their own dictionaries with a theme that connected the words chosen. Students chose one source, like a novel, or several sources like newspapers, magazines, literature assignments and television programs. They gave a definition of the word, and used it in an original sentence. A particularly outstanding dictionary was created using words from Homer's ILIAD.

EMOTIONAL DIMENSION

One last but very important dimension I have discovered about writing is the psychological and emotional one. During summer school, one of my classes presented a particular challenge to me because the students did not have the proper motivation. One day the whole class tried my patience, so while they were completing an assignment, I vented my anger by writing my feelings on the board. The students, puzzled, kept asking me what I was doing. I explained that instead of screaming or saying something I might later regret, I was working my feelings out by writing. I asked them to do the same. Their papers were among the best they had written. One girl thanked me for showing her one way to get rid of her many frustrations.

JUNIOR HIGH DIMENSION

At present, I am teaching eighth grade students. One of the most exciting parts of my job is a special class of academically talented youngsters whom I teach for a two hour block. My goal is to increase their vocabulary and reading comprehension as they continue to master the use of their

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language.

During the first six weeks, students worked on a short story booklet that contained four pieces of writing plus a original project. One piece was derived from work done on a panel discussion of a short story read. Another piece of writing was composed using the word processor. Included was a paper comparing and contrasting the first chapters of two classics read and discussed in class. The fourth was their own attempt at the personal narrative. The last was an original vocabulary game based on new words encountered in their reading.

Other plans for the year include writing their own history chapter, composing a newsletter for the school, writing a reader's theater script based on a classical Christmas story, and the publication of a literary magazine. A special project will be the celebration of an English Renaissance festival. Students will write a scenario of the times, memorize Shakespearean lines, and write a dialogue of the meeting of the great minds of the Elizabethean Age.

The writing experience has taken a new dimension in my classes because:

1. I love to write and want to share this love with others,

2. I understand the frustration and work that goes into the process, and...

3. I have experienced the excitement and pride of the finished product both in my students' and my own work and know that the end result is worth the effort.

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